

Providing Emergency Aid to College Students in a Time of Crisis

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The U.S. Department of Education is currently providing more than \$6 billion for colleges to disburse directly to students as flexible emergency aid under the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020. At the same time, other public and private funds are becoming available to assist students affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This Issue Focus highlights lessons from prior evaluations of emergency aid programs to help colleges identify students in need and allocate resources equitably, with the goal of enabling their students to navigate the current crisis and ultimately succeed in college and beyond.

LESSONS FOR DISTRIBUTING EMERGENCY AID

Research from MDRC and others points to several lessons that can help institutions distribute aid promptly, equitably, and to the students who may benefit the most, as described below.

Determine your priorities and expectations quickly.

- *Include the right stakeholders in the conversation.* If possible, include representatives of faculty, student support staff, and students themselves along with college administrators.
- *Remember that CARES Act funds and other new emergency aid funding may allow for wide institutional discretion,* and distribution of those funds does not need to comply with ordinary Title IV regulations. Look at your funding sources and the latest guidelines to understand what is allowable.
- *Decide who needs the most help.* This will undoubtedly include students with immediate and severe financial need, but you may also want to recognize or prioritize other factors such as students from low-income backgrounds, students with families to support, or students from historically marginalized communities. You may also consider supplying non-CARES Act funds to DACA students or others who may be ineligible for CARES Act emergency aid.
- *Consider using a portion of your allotment to automatically award aid to a targeted group of students,* without requiring any action on their part. This aid could be small or mid-sized grants, with information on how to access additional aid as well.



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- *Set realistic expectations* for funding amounts and the number of students who can be served, as well as for the timeline to disburse aid. Recognize that you may not be able to gather all the data you desire, and that some students may not be able to provide full data, but that alone should not prohibit access to aid.

Create simple eligibility requirements and communicate them clearly to students, staff, and other stakeholders. Requirements should include considerable flexibility.

- *Keep eligibility requirements simple and broad to ensure students can access the aid.* Prior emergency aid programs in other settings often underspent their resources because of low take-up rates, too much caution, strict requirements, or other factors.
- *Communicate aid availability and requirements clearly and widely,* with an emphasis on getting the information to the students you most want to serve, and to the staff and others who may interact with those students.
- *Use multiple channels to inform students about emergency aid,* including posting announcements on the college website and social media, and contacting students directly via email, text, mail, or phone. Communication should come from various departments, including financial aid, advising, enrollment, and faculty.
- *Ensure students know that grants are not loans,* and do not need to be paid back. Clarify whether or how aid might affect other benefits such as Pell or SNAP.

Look at your emergency aid application process from a student's point of view and ensure it doesn't inadvertently screen out the neediest students.

- *Minimize unnecessary steps and hurdles* such as requests for excessive verification or documentation. It may be difficult for many students to provide evidence of a hardship arising from COVID-19. Imposing unnecessary steps raises the risk that aid will go primarily to students who have the wherewithal to complete the requirements, rather than to the students with greatest need. It may also create additional burdens for staff, costs to institutions, and delays in administering the aid. As noted above, consider making some grants automatic.
- *Clearly outline any tasks students must complete* to apply for emergency aid, and include a timeline for when and how students may expect to receive their aid.
- *Build on existing processes and communication channels that are already working at your institution.* If possible, create a single application for all types of emergency aid that your institution offers (including grants, laptops, food pantry, housing vouchers, or other types of assistance).
- *Allow for multiple disbursement options,* including direct deposit as well as other options for students without bank accounts.
- *Include a link to the application in all communications* about the opportunity, as well as a phone number for students without Internet access.

Don't offer aid in a vacuum: Use the emergency aid application process as a chance to connect students with other student support services and resources whenever possible.

- *Advisers or other staff should proactively reach out* via phone, email, or other methods to students who submit an emergency aid application, and should encourage students to take advantage of advising and other available and appropriate services at the institution or in the community.

- Similarly, *college communications from others such as support staff, the business office, or faculty* should include brief information about the availability of emergency aid.
- *Encourage the use of multiple supports*, but emergency aid should not be conditioned on the use of other services.

Collect data to track who applies, who receives aid, and what their outcomes are. These data will help you determine whether you are reaching the students you seek to serve, and will help assess gaps, successes, or additional needs of your students and of the program overall.

- *Review data regularly with all stakeholders* to ensure a common understanding of the program and the students being served.
- *Disaggregate data* to evaluate your ability to serve vulnerable populations in your community.
- *Even if demand for aid exceeds availability, continue to collect data* on applicants to use as leverage for obtaining additional funds.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Some helpful resources and publications are listed below. For additional information about emergency aid or MDRC's work, visit www.mdrc.org or contact Evan Weissman at evan.weissman@mdrc.org.

Best Practices for Administering Emergency Aid

Helping Community College Students Cope with Financial Emergencies. MDRC's report on its evaluation of Lumina Foundation's Dreamkeepers and Angel Fund emergency financial aid programs. Pages ES-5 to ES-8 of the Executive Summary contain key lessons learned.

Emergency Aid for Higher Education: A Toolkit and Resource Guide for Decision-Makers. From Ascendium, which focuses on removing obstacles to education and training for low-income populations, and Equal Measure, which "partners with foundations, nonprofits, and government organizations to apply new ways of thinking and learning to advance social change."

The Texas Emergency Aid Report: Advocating for Emergency Aid Programs in Higher Education. From the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Suggested best practices for administration, communication, and sustainability begin on page 28.

Beyond the Food Pantry: Guide to Emergency Aid Grant Distribution. From The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, which focuses on fostering "student-ready" colleges that respond to students' basic needs.

More Information About Emergency Aid

Landscape Analysis of Emergency Aid Programs. From NASPA-Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education.

A Broader View of Emergency Aid. From Ascendium.

[A Cautionary Tale about Emergency Financial Aid without Services](#), Findings from a single-site randomized controlled trial. No impacts were observed from the offer of emergency aid alone, but its low take-up rate and small sample size make the results difficult to generalize. The study found that including case management services with emergency aid increased students' enrollment rates.

More Information About the CARES Act

[CARES Act: Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund](#). U.S. Department of Education official site.

[CARES Act and Community Colleges](#). American Association of Community Colleges webinar on the details of the CARES Act.

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